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OttawaWatch 119: Mouths and ears of sermons

By Lloyd Mackey

I have not heard,, recently, that Elizabeth May intends, in retirement from federal politics, to become an Anglican minister – as she had hinted she might, so long ago. But I think she is likely no less devout in her Anglican faith, if not less doctrinaire.

In April, 2019 May married John Kidder, brother to the late actress Margot Kidder. Arguably that marriage likely reshaped any thinking about a post-retirement “pledging the cloth.”

And why would I think that? As it happens, John Kidder is a fairly serious Buddhist and not a likely candidate to be the pastoral consort to an Anglican minister.

So how do I know he is a fairly serious Buddhist? As it happens, Edna and I met and had a congenial conversation with Kidder at the very evangelical June, 2019 funeral of Mark Warawa, who represented a Langley, BC, riding in the House of Commons for 15 years, from 2004 until his death. Kidder, then married to May for three months, agreed to quietly represent her and the Green Party at the Warawa funeral. We found him pensively surveying the crowd of mostly conservative types from the edge of the parking lot, and wandered over to make conversation. He made two points clear, in response to our questions. Firstly, he and Elizabeth had a deep respect for Warawa and his own strong regard for many Green Party environmental perspectives. Secondly, a Buddhist, he had a real regard for both his wife’s Anglicanism and Warawa’s strongly-declared evangelical Christianity. So there!

Anyone who has been involved in communication or social behavior workshops will know of the exercise that calls for participants to line up in a row and whisper a statement from ear to ear down the line.

The object of the exercise is to demonstrate that a statement whispered from the first person in line to the second will end up being quite different when it is whispered into the ear of the last person in line.

Elizabeth May’s sermon, this past Sunday, to the congregation of Wesley-Knox United Church in London, Ontario, is the latest clear example of faith-based communication gone awry.

May, the leader of the Green party, has made her Anglican credentials a matter of public record several times recently, even allowing it to be known that her second preference to being a party leader might be to gain ordination as a clergyperson in her denomination.

The purpose of this particular analysis is to explore, once again, the usefulness of communicating faith values with clarity and without bombast. The significance of good communication skills becomes more obvious as leaders emerge from the cocoons of fringe parties or edgy faith groups to become players in the political mainstream.

In this particular case, May was reported, apparently accurately, in the *London Free Press* of April 30, by Jonathan Sher. That report quoted her as suggesting that while many evangelical Christians care about the Earth, a fundamentalist sect would rather see the planet destroyed.

“They are waiting for the end time in glee ...” she said.

But, by the time her quote was subjected to editorial analysis at the *National Post*, it was reinterpreted and, in effect mish-mashed to suggest, that “in referring to evangelical Christians, Ms. May stated that some ‘are waiting for the end (of) time in glee.’”

So the third ear – the *NP* reader – was treated to a distortion of a statement that was fed by the first mouth – May – into the first ear – that of reporter Sher.

The distortion is understandable. Fundamentalists are often mistaken for evangelicals or vice versa, by journalists who do not sweat the fine points of theological definition.

The fact is that there are fundamentalists in most faiths – people and leaders who insist that their version of the truth must be unquestioned by the rest of society. The least immoderate of such fundamentalists would insist that their followers not be permitted any dialog with outsiders. The most radical might occasionally fly aircraft into tall buildings.

Evangelicals who enjoy sharing their faith with others, to the point of enthusiasm, might be mistaken for fundamentalists. But the mistake may be more one of perception than reality.

The point of this analysis, I would hope, is to engender some interest, on the part of Christian leaders, in tempering their public rhetoric with some sensitivity regarding the interpretation the second, third or tenth ear might get from the original statement.

When journalists are invited to listen to Sunday morning sermons, the inviters should be aware of the potential impact that a misunderstanding of their statements might create. And brief references to Nazism, such as that engaged in by May in last Sunday’s sermon, are sure to get attention in the wider world.

Indeed, if May’s intention was to get publicity among Christians for the doctrines of the Green Party, the Nazism reference – and the presence of a newspaper reporter – would guarantee success.

If that was her intention – and I am not saying it was, necessarily – May subtracted considerably from the opportunity for a faith-based approach to constructively influence the political process.

In effect, whether she realizes it or not, she was speaking in a way that she might find abhorrent, if similar words were coming from the mouth of a fundamentalist minister.

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